NEGATION AS THE DEFEAT OF EXPECTATIONS IN TELLING A STORY

Most things in life go wrong—Aristotle: Rhetoric,
Book II, Chapters 12-14

There is the suspicion, often growing into certainty, that characters in fiction and prose, as well as persons in real life, that work hard to achieve their elusive goals will never, ever be rewarded. Not Wile Coyote, in pursuit of fast Road Runner, nor Sylvester the Cat, eyes trained on the unreachable Teety Bird, not Don Quixote, beaten and humiliated by "righting all wrongs," or, perhaps above all, Robert Browning, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and its litany of negations like "lie," "fail," "heart failure" and the Preacher employment of the 39 instances of the negative (negative in the realm of things)—or "vanity" in Ecclesiastes as well as the protagonist of Shirley Jackson's The Lottery, expecting to be a spectator of a sacrificial event, but ending up its victim.¹

Should we then say that defeated expectations (DE henceforth) are caused by not managing them properly? Or, better yet, not having them at all? But, since DE equates in a rough way, with being conscious—waking
up in the morning, say, with an agenda in mind—escaping from DE seems impossible. If so, then we might want to say that DE comes in two different categories, the intentional and the unintentional, the everyday variety and a "tool" for every writer.ii

At the end of this essay I will try to make the case that the Greek myth of Icarus—as well as that of Tantalus—and a short story "Our People," written by a friend, exemplify what can be called the Ur-examples of DE as a basic structure of narration. Every story that narrates a failure involving intentional content, intentional form and an intentional object, as either given or created by the protagonist, someone meeting and going down in defeat, at the hands of the Other, person, a thing, an aporetic situation, performs DE.iii

I lack the space here to give a comprehensive account of a three-fold intentional structure of DE. But here, as a sort of starter, I give only a skeletal description. I invite readers, interested full description of it, to read Tim Crane's brilliant discussion of the subject in his Objects of Thought, chapter four.

Intentional Content. This feature of DE equates with real-world and fictional intersubjectivity, or the presumption of the Other, usually a person,
or a collection of persons a situation or a thing. Examples of the Other from above are fast Road Runner, the unreachable Tweety Bird, or Don Quixote, beaten and humiliated by a hostile world.

Without the presence of Road Runner, Tweety Bird there could not be DE. This is to say that everything about DE are created, and can be reduced to negatives, things that may not exist but which can be "thought about."

**Intentional form or mode.** This equates with "where things happen" or the setting of DE. The chief *mode* here is inside/outside. In Kafka's Before the Law, *Vor deem Gesetz*, the setting is before a door and a guard "Turhuter" (usually mistranslated "gatekeeper")

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Vor dem Gesetz steht ein Türhüter. Zu diesem Türhüter kommt ein Mann vom Lande und bittet um Eintritt in das Gesetz. Aber der Türhüter sagt, daß er ihm jetzt den Eintritt nicht gewähren könne. Der Mann überlegt und fragt dann, ob er also später werde eintreten dürfen. »Es ist möglich«, sagt der Türhüter, »jetzt aber nicht.« Da das Tor zum Gesetz offensteht wie immer und der Türhüter beiseite tritt, bückt sich der Mann, um durch das Tor in das Innere zu sehn. Als der Türhüter das.
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Intentional object. In Kafka's story the object, or purpose, of "ein Man vom Lande," who stands before the door and door keeper is, presumably, to seek protection from the law. Kafka does not tell us what the issue, or problem, with the "Mann" is—how the law would help him with it. As usual with Kafka, what motivates his protagonist is left obscure, or completely absent. Here we are only informed that the "Mann" "bittet um Eintritt in das Gezetz," pleads for an entre to the law.

To make full use of the energy, scope and structural significance of DE, the product of negation, ontological as well as linguistic, I recommend that one should follow the thought-pattern of Wallace Stevens' lines in The Snowman (the italics are mine):

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

In a London School Stylistics account of the above one uses a quantitative, as well as a grammatical and tertium quid (the third what) approach in order to "motivate to prominence" the meaning of the text (Halliday). Repetition of key words is also a crucial part of the analytic process. Three physical senses, performing functional grammar, feeling
("cold"), seeing ("behold," "behols," "regard"), hearing ("listens"), motivate to prominence the relationship between the "mind" of the snowman, the winter environment and the "listener"—in short, a tertium quid featured as meaning, unknown, undefined, a nothing, repeated three times, that is something "the nothing that is."

Before continuing, a few more words should be said, from the point of view of grammar and its role in promoting the role negation has in meaning as proper use—namely, negation in its three forms, negation in the realm of language, negation in the realm of things and privation, an object, an event, and idea and so on, lacking a property, by nature or artifact, it would have. Aristotle, the primus inter pares of authors on negation give the example of blindness, the absence of sight the primary and natural property of eyes.

Most, but not all, DE have a scalar structure, a scale on which an author places the protagonist, one where h/s is still alive, stopped from reaching h/h goal at the end of the narrative or dead—from military combat for example—blocking the way to victory, a storm on Mt Everest before the summit, a car wreck on the way to church and so on.
DE can occur when an elevator stops, say, between the second and third floor when its passengers had E (expectations) of reaching the ninth floor by punching the ninth floor button.

Elevators, designed in deceit, try, accordingly, to counter the fear all persons have who ride elevators. But the design is never enough because the will—arguably, the salient characteristic of every, from birth to death, human being.

All these characters may be highly motivated and industrious, but the expectations—of reaching a goal, of righting all wrongs, catching what you desire, being lied to, and so on—of the characters are all defeated—the characters' existence reduced to a waiting game and futile attempts of explain it. Europeans, defeated by Aborigines, in Herzog's movie, Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen, is an example. Another example is Waiting for Godot. Vladimir and Estragon, futile waiting presumably for God, or a god-like figure, who never, of course, makes an appearance. Sartre, in Being and Nothingness, employs negation as DE in the same way with the scene where the protagonist experiencing the "absence of Pierre"iv
The setting of Godot, please notice, is usually presented as barren of vegetation, a single tree is leafless, the talk of the characters, especially by Lucky, is meaningless gobbledygook. This is an example of "privation," of things lacking that could be naturally there—negation in the realm of things as well as privation.

Of the three forms of negation, identified by linguists and philosophers, negation in the realm of language ("no, not, never" for example), negation in the realm of things and privation (the lack of something that could be there, or could happen, first identified and described by Aristotle as steresis) none are, perhaps as prominent—fugitive and infinite in meaning—as Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear, Kafka's Die Vanwandlung and Cervantes' Don Quixote.

"All human systems of communication contain a representation of negation. No animal communication system includes negative utterances, and consequently none possesses a means for assigning truth value, for lying, for irony, or for coping with false or contradictory statements….if we are ipso facto the animals that deny….any linguistic determination directly or indirectly involves a negation" (Horn viii).
With this in mind I would suggest only humans—with an overall intact mind, with a good memory and the need to be seen, heard, and known—and who tell stories of DE they, or persons they know, have experienced it, not as potentiality, but as actuality. This suggests, furthermore, that there is a causal link between experiencing, remembering, and telling stories of DE, not only of themselves but also of others. An analogy, as far as narrative structure goes, we might draw is to the theory of perception:

Something is seen only by virtue of being a cause of what is seen...some absences are causes....Tay Sachs disease is caused by the absence of the enzyme hexosaminidase A. (Sorensen 4-5). Cause, by the presence of absence, is the core of a DE. A partial explanation of this is Gunnar Bjornesson's "If you believe in positive facts, you should believe in negative facts." What makes negative facts "true," the author claims, is that every positive fact, say a snowstorm, cannot have every property without also lacking some property, either one that is either unknown, possible, but not necessary. So, the unknown properties of a snowstorm might include a list of all sources that make it possible. Or, more commonly, the duration of the storm, an hour? A day? Three days? And so on.
"This young live by expectation, the old by memory." Aristotle

(Rhetoric).

Bjornesson' provocative article reaches, in part, back to Aristotle's discuss of truth in his "Sea Battle" examination of a future event. All rises from the question, "will a sea battle take place tomorrow"? True or false? Aristotle, arguably, the greatest thinker who has ever lived or will ever live replies "don't know." But what I do know is that it is "necessary" one or the other, yes or no, will be the case. Shakespeare, following in Aristotle's tracks, structures Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" as a "necessary" response: one or the other.

So, how does all this relate to DE? Simple. If you believe that every E (expectation) can be undefeated, then you must believe it can be defeated. Why must you believe that? Because it is necessary that you believe that every E has, necessarily, the property of failure. Failure is, in philosophical jargon, part of the ontology of every act. The plots of Beckett, Jackson, Browning and the rest could not exist without the concept of a necessary truth applied to E. It is a positive fact that most persons believe in the Will—which equates in many ways with the more abstract expectation—has many forms, "free will," "willfulness," "willing," "desire," "want," "need,"
"an option to believe as well as an "option to select one kind of action, or work over other possible ones." In the Judeo-Christian tradition the will as expectation first appears in the story of Adam, Eve and the serpent. The serpent does not appear only to be named. Instead, when he appears, he speaks. As an individual with speech with which to articulate expectations, not only his but also those of Adam and Eve. Indeed he is the cause of their expectations and the source of what to think, act, do next. Without the serpent's appearance there is no possibility of a certain way of judging, speaking and acting.

God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it (the tree) or touch it, lest you die. Then the serpent said to the woman, “You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will like God, knowing good and evil.”’ (Genesis 3, 1-6).

This passage, perhaps more than any other text, that most E—appearing by Eve turning to see the tree and becoming aware of wanting to know without evidence—suggests, reasonably enough, that she is bored with life in the garden.

(Expectation: "wait, defer action," from Latin expectare/exspectare "await, look out for; desire, hope, long for, anticipate; look for with anticipation," from ex-"thoroughly" (see ex-)}
+ spectare "to look," frequentative of specere "to look at" (from PIE root too observe")

Not all occurrences of DE are unintentional. The unintentional being one you don't (or hope) to happen, like death in combat. But other DEs, created by the author and motivated to prominence by different grammatical means, are intentional. You put yourself in a position in which you know, first hand, what will happen. Take, for example, Evelyn Waugh's description of the Big Wheel at Luna Park:

You pay five francs and go into a room with tiers of seats all around, and in the centre the floor is made of a great disc of polished wood that revolves quickly. At first you sit down and watch the others. They are all trying to sit in the wheel, and they keep getting flung off, and that makes them laugh too. It's great fun.

You see, the nearer you can get to the hub of the wheel the slower it is moving and the easier it is to stay on. There's generally someone in the centre who stands up and sometimes does a sort of dance. Often he's paid by the management, though, or, at any rate, he's allowed in free. Of
course at the very centre there's a point completely at rest, if one could only find it.

The whole point about the wheel is that you needn't get on it at all, if you don't want to. People get hold of ideas about life, and that makes them think they've got to join in the game, even if they don't enjoy it. It doesn't suit everyone.

In short, there are DEs you don't choose the conditions that make them happen (unintentional) and those that happen because you know, or can sense, what will happen (intentional). The unintentional are, by far, the most common. Unpredictable, unknown (even unknowable) things happen. One might even want to say that unintentional DEs are deterministic while intentional ones are an expression of free-will.

Discussion of DEs, in a broad sense, can be said to apply to stories told in both illiterate and literate societies, orally in the former, written in the latter. Homer's *The Iliad* was presumably composed and recited in, and for, the former society. The text had to be memorized by someone and then, after the death, or loss of memory, by the first narrator the text had to be taken up by others. Loss of memory in any narrator meant loss of the text.
After the development of writing, in the last few thousand years, transformations, within the context of literature, of DEs can be said to have occurred. Three of these should be briefly mentioned, writing style, survival of the text and authorship. Writing style involved typographical conventions that occur only in a literate society. For example, certain rhythmic units have to written in successive lines and because of this we call them "lines" and space them in the center of the page. So we have:

The day is done and the darkness

falls from the wings of night.

As a feather is wafted downward

from an eagle in his flight (Longfellow).

Another example is George Herbert's *The Altar* written with short and long lines to form a rough picture of an altar. Neither of these examples are structured like DEs. But where they do occur, as in Browning's *Childe Roland*, Donne's *Lecture Upon a Shadow,* and many of Shakespeare's sonnets (for example, #29, 33, 94 [devouring time as DE]) DE conforms, in most cases, to typographical conventions.

The text, and its representation of DE, will only survive in an illiterate society, as alluded to above, only as long as it continues to be memorized by at least one person in each generation. This, obviously, is not the case with
the written text. As long as it is judged to have literary merit—*Beowulf, Don Quixote, Everyman*—it will generally continue to be printed, and by so doing, be more likely preserve DEs, than texts transmitted orally. Or, put it another way, literary may preserve a text beyond the period within the history during which the text qualified as literature. This, again, presupposes a literate society, one like the readers of the late middles ages and their welcome response to the Greek and Roman classical works.

Emotions, that often translate into action, ones commonly associated with DE are "hope," "fortitude," "acceptance," "difficulty" all more or less cognate with the Greek *aporia* (a noun of negation by means of the alpha affixal "a-") and the source of the English "not porous."

A common term for classical authors like Anaximander, Tertullian, Plato and others, one used to conjecture how things may adhere, act, and combine with each other is *tertium quid*—triton ti (τρίτον τί)—usually represented in the clause, "finding the *tertium quid.*" the "third thing."vii As the unknown "thing" presumably holding polarities together and allowing them to function properly, any given polarity—especially the affirmative/negative one—how grammar supports meaning is impossible—or, more familiarly, how *verba* and *res* mutually react and give substance and significance to each other.
Thinking and representing with Thirdness seems to be as old as the imagination and new as the iPod. One only needs mention the linguistic first, second and third person (I, you, it), the Trinity, three-dimensional reality, Goldilocks and so on. The seminal work on this topic is perhaps Usener's Dreiheit (1903). In the first part of his work, Usener assesses the importance of three in Greek antiquity. He notes the significance of three and its continuations in various folk and religious traditions. He finds fifteen different trinities of gods in Hesiod's Theogony. He identifies groupings composed of three gods of equal status and then goes on to men triads that entail divinities of unequal status. In the second part of his work, Usener focuses on visual depictions of the trinity, three-headed gods and goddesses, the best known being Hecate, goddess of crossroads.

In the third, and last part, of his essay, Usener (please note his use of Thirdness as an organizing principle for Thirdness) focuses on the movement from "2" to "3." Examples here are god-pairs that became trinities, the transformation of two seasons into three, paths and roads becoming perceived as three-pronged forks and the winds going from two to
three. Finding symbolism in numbers appears in the Pythagorean system of "arithmetic theology." (351). Usener claims that ancient people did not simply grasping numbers as establishing a sequence, 1, 2, 3… but more as a formative principle: Large numbers, for examples were used for time concepts, starting with the number "7" and going up. In contrast, small numbers, such as "2", were used for expressions for quantity, while three was used to communicate completeness. More problematic, however, is Usener's suggestion that the Greeks could not count above three. To support this view he cites the research of Von den Steinen that members of the Bakairi tribe (in Brazil) can only count to two. To continue counting, they construe three as 2+1, four as 2+2 and so on. (H. Von en Steinen. 1897: Unter den Naturvolkern Zentral-Brasiliens. D. Reimer: Berlin [umlaute over "O" in Naturvolkern])

The principal modern advocate of thinking by Thirdness is C. S. Peirce. 'Thirdness," he says, "pours in upon us through every avenue of sense" (Writings 5:98) With this, and other statements, Peirce would no doubt agree with Usener that Thirdness, or Peirce's "universal categories, can represent completeness, finality, wholeness—a situation analogous to not counting beyond three. One of Peirce's succinct definitions of Thirdness is this:
The First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything. The Second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The Third is that which is what it is owning to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other (Writings 248).

First, in other words, is whatever is present and immediate; Second is reaction to a First; Third is mediate between First and Second. For Peirce there are, for example, three kinds of reasoning, deduction, abduction and induction; three "departments" of philosophy, namely, Phenomenology, Normative Science and Metaphysics (Writings V and VI: 78). One can, he adds, see three phases in the evolution of the cosmos, "no-thing-ness" or "un-determinant potentiality," "determinate potentiality" and "actuality" and "three grades of Thirdness" (Essential 253). But Peirce's descriptions, and uses, of Thirdness go far beyond categorizing sensory information or theorizing about evolution. Three examples, out of many others, can be given. First, there is his use of Thirdness to "find the Middle as the ideal"; second is his use of Thirdness as a reductive procedure for analyzing complex situations—or what I later call here the "manifold." In the words of one of Peirce's editors, Peirce was familiar with "the fundamentality of
triadicity [that found] that monadic, dyadic, and triadic relations are irreducible, while relations of any degree (or adicity) greater than triadic can be expressed in combinations of triadic relations. This is known as Peirce's reduction thesis" (Essential xxx). Finally, there is Peirce's use of Thirdness to showcase "novelty." Whatever is new is a Third. That is, it is a product of combining Firsts with Seconds to produce new knowledge, the unexpected, a fresh start and the like. In conventional terminology, the new thing (the Third) is always greater than the sum of its parts (Firsts and Seconds). In all of Peirce's speculations on Thirdness one can see the influence of Aristotle's thoughts on "emergence," or how order comes from disorder, to produce the "new":

A totality (what emerged or is emerging) is not, as it were, a mere heap, but the whole is something besides the parts (Metaphysics 1045A 9-10).

But some of my colleagues have objected to this account by my ignoring the problem of "is."

A problem with "is" takes the following general form. If we are told that X is Y we know how it is supposed to be true, but that depends on a conceptual or theoretical background and is not conveyed by the 'is' alone. We know how both "X" and "Y" refer, and the kinds of things to which they
refer, and we have a rough idea how the two referential paths might converge on a single thing, be it an object, a person, a process, an event or whatever. But when the two terms of the identification are very disparate it may not be so clear how it could be true. We may not have even a rough idea of how the two referential paths could converge, or what kind of things they might converge on, and a theoretical framework may have to be supplied to enable us to understand this. Without the framework an air of mysticism surrounds the identification.

Can language itself function as a DE? If we take Hamlet and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* as examples we might make a case for it. Polonius: "What do you read my lord?" Hamlet: "Words, Words, Words" (*Hamlet* 2,2). Is Hamlet suggesting that words can be meaningless without understanding, and without distinct, referents?

With *Praise of Folly* DE appears as the defeat of truth and the triumph of opinion: "The reality of things depends solely on opinion. Everything in life is so diverse, so opposed, so obscure, that we cannot be assured of any truth." Implied here is that finding the truth, and perhaps evidence for it, is an unreachable goal because opinion, like diverging paths with misleading signposts—obscure, arrows pointed in four different directions, words unrecognizable—block the traveler chances of finding the right way.
If Laurence Sterne could be resurrected I would expect him to agree with Folly, a genius of the same kidney.

But the modern writer who seems (at least to me), one who has created stories, comic, serious, tragicomedic, ones that have made DE polypotent, possibly infinite in meaning (at least interpretation) is Franz Kafka—as I have tried to show, in part, with an essay on the affixal double negative, "ungeheuer Ungzeifer" from Die Vanwandlung.\textsuperscript{ix}

But a close competitor would be the story of Icarus. It has been a subject of interpretation many times, in classical times (Ovid and Appolodorus), in modern poetry (Auden; William Carlos Williams) in paintings (Brueghel; Picasso).\textsuperscript{x} From a DE point of view the story narrates a cautionary tale reducible to a before, during and after of the death of Icarus. Before he and his father Daedalus take to the sky to escape the captivity of Minos, we are introduced to a series of DE involving Theseus, the wife of King Minos, Daedalus, the Minotaur each of whom suffer DE within and outside the Labyrinth. With the short life of Icarus the story raises the question, common in all cultures, of following the advice of the elders—should I, or should I not?—. The view is always a first person "I," the pronoun of an individual self-hood. But the problem of accepting or
rejecting advice also involves a second person "you" in order to create a actor/action/patient relationship and a DE.

Here there is no room to discuss in details what these commentators see in the story of Icarus. But, invoking the awesome power of the "to be" verb—specifically, the triad "existence," "location," and "duration"—we are allowed to conjecture that all DE can be reduced to these three crucial functions of "to be/is".\textsuperscript{xi}

Existence, as I have fleetingly noticed above, always presupposes the potentially of non-existence, nothingness. Things come into being from some cause, last for a period of time, and go out of being, like a performer entering on stage, saying a few words, and then departing—nothingness at the beginning and nothingness at the end, birth and death.

That we can "think about" things that don't exist, all forms of negation, mythical objects, unicorns, flying horses (Pegasus), as embodying truth much like existing things do, is the principle subject of Crane's Objects of Thought.

Location, the third "product" of the almighty verb, "is/to be"—the other two being existence and duration—as given by Kahn, is crucial in any account of DE. An example is a short story, by a friend of mine, Max Lyon,
dead since 1997, killed, along with two friends, by an avalanche while
camped in winter on Razorback Ridge, Logan Utah.xii

The location, or setting of Max's story, entitled "Our People," is in
Garnet Canyon and Black Ice Couloir of the Middle Teton Mountain of the
American West. The narrative begins, as is usual with such stories, with
Max (the narrator) and his companion, Eli, asking the climbing ranger about
the winter and its possible dangers:

Moderate avalanche hazard and a forecast of 'scattered showers.'

Not exactly a red light. But as one who had been up
Garnet Canyon seven times, past winters, to stand on a
summit only three times. I didn't find these signals a
welcoming green.

Then after thinking they were "stalling," and the thinking and feelings it can
generate, they started their skiing, across the Meadows and towards a "giant
mountain castle," the high, huge, mountain.

Breathing hard…looking up and all round me…inside me
fear tumbled with desire.

Arriving at their campsite:
I felt, standing small in the snow…that it would not be
things—a potential storm, the unskiable parts of the
mountain, human fraility—that decide what happens, or
even fate or chance.

A violent storm came, shredding their tent and erasing their tracks up the
mountain. With little food and a stove, and just enough propane to melt
snow for water, they waited for the storm to stop:

    Resolving not to make dumb mistakes or unilateral
decisions.

At this point the significance of the title "Our People" enters the narrative.
Now Max, the narrator, realizing that they might be days stranded on the
mountain, remembers that he had told his girlfriend and his father they
would be back in a day:

    He worried that they would be worried. I lay inside the
    snapping tent and tried to will the Park Service to present
    my father from somehow getting in his to come up this
    canyon.

He didn't. Nor did anyone else. Max and Eli were rescued, after the storm
cleared, by a Park Service helicopter.
So what is the nature of the DE in the story? Overall, I suggest, it is composed, and represented, as a cause and effect process. Cause—ignoring the advice of the park ranger, the velocity and duration of an unexpected storm, Max's memories of his father as well as other issues—generate a positive as well as a negative effect.

Negative effects, as negative information, is far more powerful than affirmative (positive) effects. For some strange reason failure is far more interesting—even if you are the failure—than not failing.

Quote Sorensen

Let the reader decide.

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\[^i\] Introduction to Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing by Mina P. Shaughnessy

\[^ii\] A common alternate expression for the "idea" of DE, one frequently found in publications like the New York Times, The New Yorkers and the TLS, is "stymied aspirations."
Aporetic, from *aporia*, a negative of *-poria* when our word "porous." So *aporetic* appears in many contexts in Greek texts having the general meaning of "no way through," "difficulty," "blockage" as well as others.

Chapter one, part one.

See Aristotle *Physics* 13.4; 192a. The coming-to-be of physical being requires three principles: an underlying subject or substrate that persists through the change; a determination of that subject, which is the term or end of the process; and a lack or absence of determination, which is its inception (see matter and form).

Aristotle describes matter as having a natural desire or appetite for form, as a woman desires a man, or the ugly the beautiful (192a 17–24)

privation is the unfulfilled potentiality of matter. See Charlotte Witt’s rich text, *Ways of Being: Potentiality and Actuality in Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (Cornell University Press, 2003), especially the third section of chapter 4 and chapter 5 for reflections on how Aristotle compares and contrasts them using the ancient technique of Tertium Quid.

http://www.phil.gu.se/gunnar/Negative%20Facts.pdf

The essay can be downloaded from my digital commons site at Utah State University.

Perhaps the most complete story of Icarus, his father Daedalus and Minos is given by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* (VIII:183–235)


http://climbinglife.com/qour-peopleq-by-max-lyon/